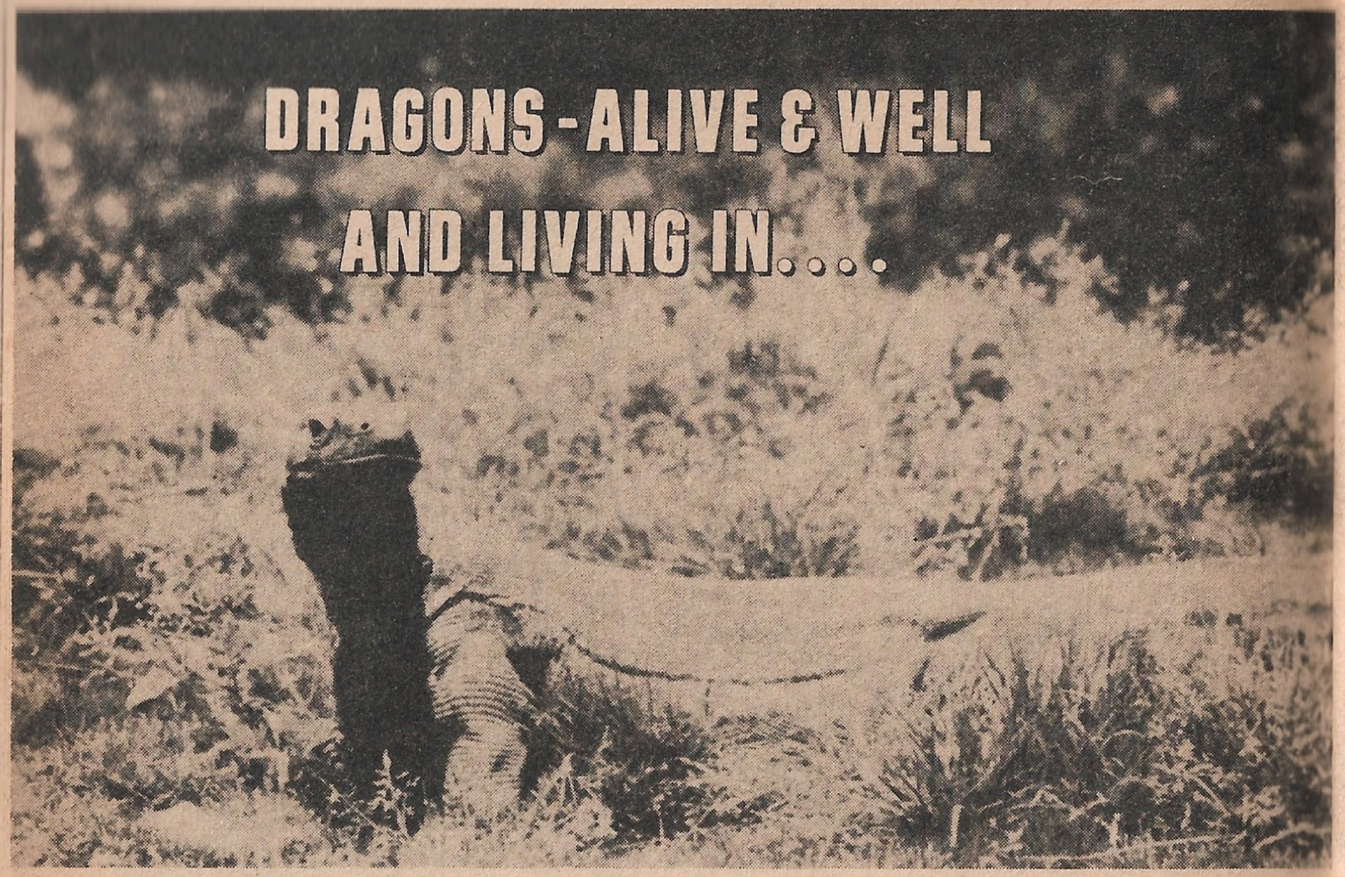


The Komodo dragon, which may have served as the model for the "mythical" dragon, survives today on a tiny Asian island but its relatives roam several continents.

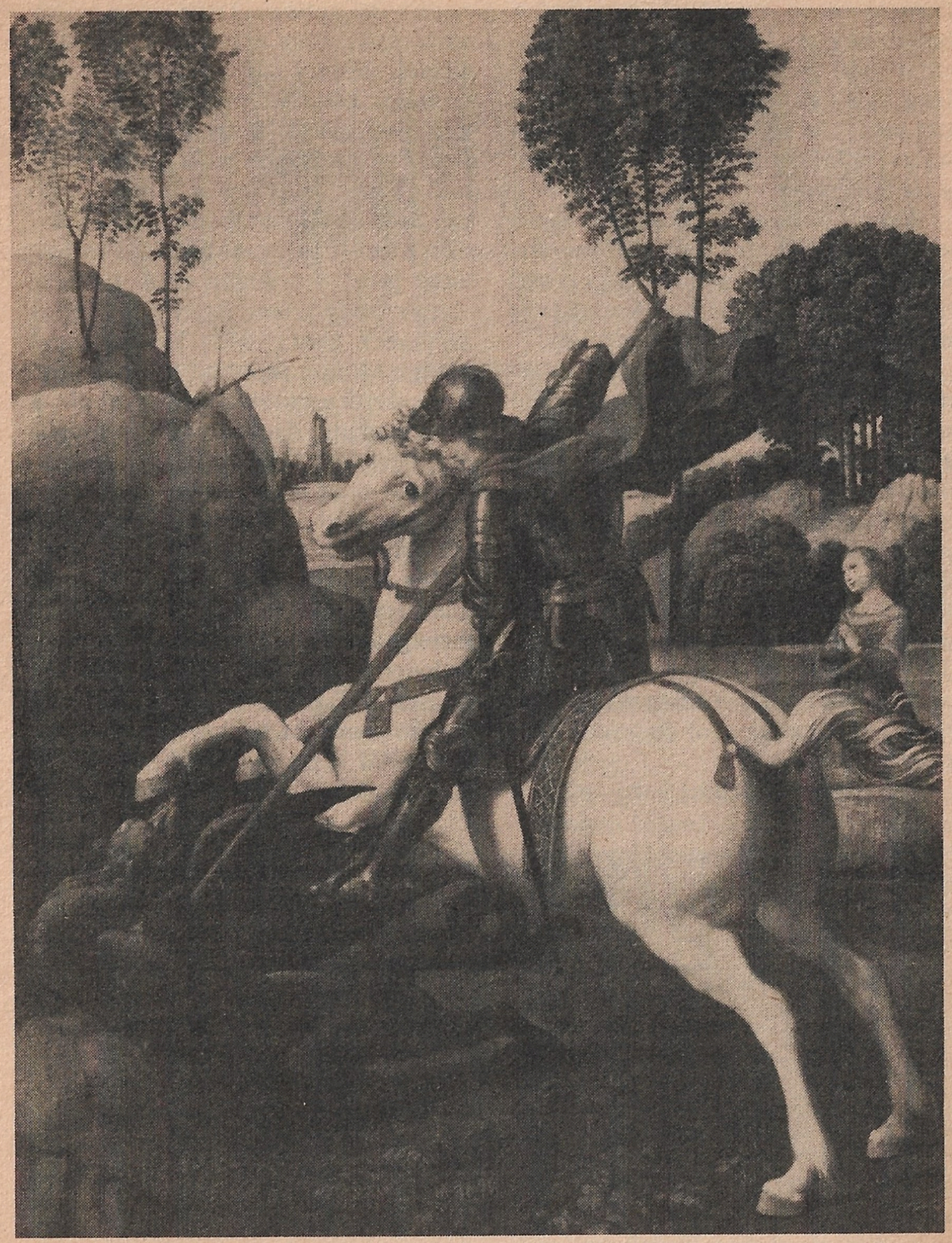
The legends are right — the dragon is a powerful, ferocious beast which still counts human beings among its victims.

By Richard Lee-Fulgham

DURING THE 18th Century "enlightened" scientists trained the cold eye of logic on the dragon and concluded the creature was too exotic to exist, that it had to be the product of superstition and overworked imagination.

But the scientists were wrong. Real, massive, man-eating dragons did exist in medieval times — by the millions — and they exist today. With luck they will exist tomorrow.

One look at such a creature should be enough to convince anybody of the reality of dragons. Although they now exist only on the tiny island of Komodo and two adjacent islands, the immense Komodo dragon (*Varanus*



In this famous painting St. George slays a dragon in the North African nation of Libya where monitor lizards, which this creature closely resembles, still exist. ("St. George and the Dragon" courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.)

(komodoensis) commonly reaches a length of over 10 feet, weighs a muscular 350 pounds and sports inch-long, saw-toothed "shark teeth" which can sever the leg tendons of a half-ton water buffalo or rip the stomach out of a living horse.

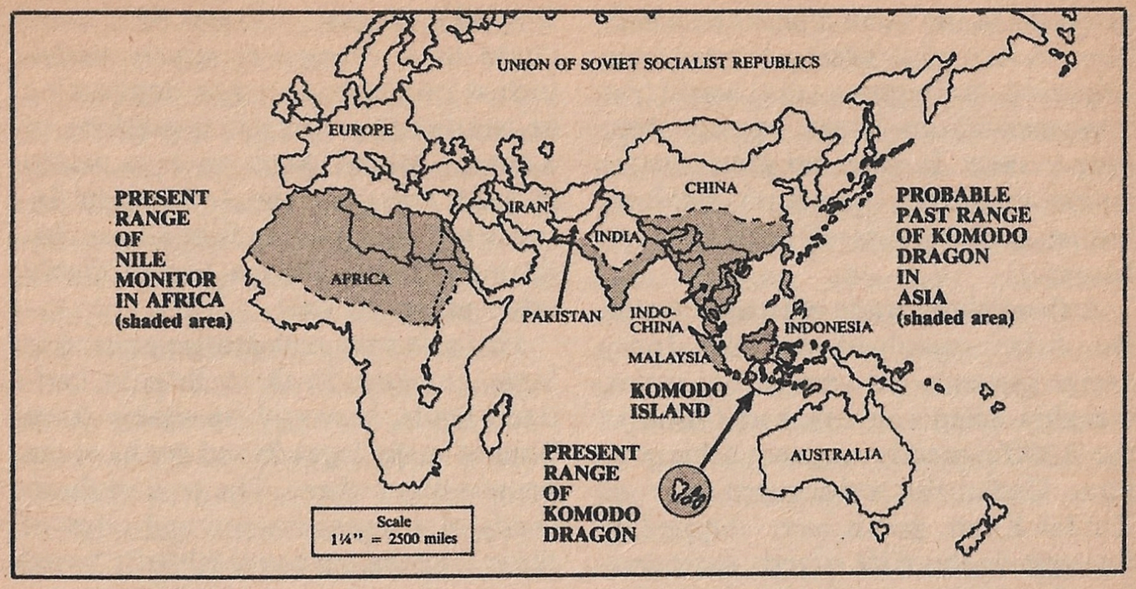
When cornered, these dragons sometimes rear five feet into the air, slash wildly with razor-sharp, clawed forelegs and snap with powerful jaws of almost dinosaurlike proportions.

The Komodo dragons behave almost exactly as the dragons of legend and folklore are reputed to behave. Besides rearing to attack, these dragons are territorial animals which dig large "caves" as centers of territorial lairs and defend them by ferociously charging interlopers. What's more, these lairs often are littered with decomposing corpses of prey and enemy. The Komodo dragon, whose dietary preferences include rotting meat, often leaves the remains of its victims to ripen in the sun.

Even more startling, the 10-foot reptile is a notorious man-eater which without warning may attack working natives, unwary children and sleeping campers. Like all monitor lizards — and the Komodo dragon is a monitor lizard — the dragon has a mouth like a snake's (the lower jaw is "hinged" and can be normally dislocated in two distinct places); this enables it to swallow large prey in a single gulp. In their classic study *Giant Reptiles* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973) Sherman and Madge Minton reported a 101-pound Komodo dragon swallowing whole a 90-pound pig. An adult dragon weighing between 200 and 300 pounds could — once it had broken the collarbone — easily consume an entire human body.

The Komodo dragon is only one of many species of monitor lizards found throughout Asia, Africa, Indochina, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Indian subcontinent, Borneo, New Zealand and the thousands of islands around these lands. All these monitor lizards share the same basic habits and temperament

Although shown in a composite photograph the relative sizes of 10-foot Komodo dragon and five-foot "damsel" are accurate. An adult dragon weighs 350 pounds.



as the Komodo species and several of them reach dragon proportions, even today. There is good reason to believe these awesome lizards reached even greater size before the common use of gunpowder.

A 30-inch water monitor uses its sense of smell to stalk its prey. Waiting for an opportune moment, it leaps at its victim and tears it limb from limb or swallows it whole. Imagine a 10-foot Komodo dragon doing the same thing and you begin to understand the fear with which dragons long have been regarded.

An adult Komodo dragon is a huge armored killing machine whose victims include adult pigs, goats, ponies, other dragons, giant snakes, deer and human beings. Fortunately a mature man can outrun the dragon in open land; on the creature's own territory, however, the chase might come to a different conclusion — inside the reptile's gullet.

When these creatures were discovered in 1912, some scientists speculated that the animals might have served as the models for the "imaginary" dragon. But skeptics were quick to ask how the dragons, isolated on a tiny island only 22 miles long and 11 miles wide, could have inspired dragon legends in every part of the world.

The answer, I think, is something like this:

Geological evidence indicates that Komodo Island is of recent volcanic origin and has not existed long enough for any animal to have evolved independently there. Not only the Komodo dragon but all of Komodo's animal population *must have* originated elsewhere and been introduced to their present island home.

Komodo Island is separated from the nearest large landmass by more than 500 miles of turbulent seas, making it physically impossible for any land animal to have swum the distance. Tiny animals may have drifted ashore on floating debris and birds may have flown. But the larger land animals must have arrived some other way,

probably in the same manner in which thousands of other creatures have been dispersed throughout the world: as "stowaways" on board human shipping vessels. It takes no great imagination to picture immature monitors hiding in the holds of ancient cargo barges.

A flourishing trade existed between the Asian mainland and the Indonesian islands in medieval times. Genghis Khan's invasion of China in the 1200's greatly expanded his empire. Under the subsequent rule of Kublai Khan, goods were shipped as far west as the rich islands surrounding the Moluccan Straits, including Komodo. Thousands of ships crisscrossed the various trade routes and apparently dispersed mainland animals among the islands.

Geological studies show that Komodo dragons did not evolve on the continent of Australia or the other, larger islands south of Komodo. Due to the ancient shifts in the earth's crust a very real "line of demarcation" separates Australia from the Indonesian islands. No animal species of Australian origin exist on Komodo Island. That leaves us with only one conclusion: The Komodo dragon originated on an ancient sizable landmass other than Australia.

So it is clear that (1) the Komodo dragon once enjoyed a range beyond Komodo Island and (2) it existed outside its present range within historical times.

Because predators like the Komodo dragon and the Bengal tiger have just one major enemy — man — their ranges are limited only by food supply and climate. Presumably, then, the Komodo dragon at one time well could have roamed relatively undisturbed over a huge range duplicating or nearing the climatic conditions of Komodo Island. Such an area would include not only the Indonesian Islands but the mainlands of China, Indochina, India, Burma and probably other places as well.

Had this very real dragon existed in large numbers in these heavily civilized lands, it would inevitably have figured in the legends and myths of the people living there. The tens of thousands of statues, images and tales of these dragons were undoubtedly based on actual experiences with the creatures. The reptilian head with glowing eyes, the heavy armored skin, the gruesome and putrid remains surrounding their dens, the shape of the body, jaws, claws and tail — these features of the classical dragon are the features of the Komodo dragon.

One might object that classical dragons, unlike their real-life counterparts, possess wings. But in ancient and medieval art lions and pythons, two animals no one ever accused of being "mythical," also are depicted with wings. (The pythons even have claws!) The fact is that the art of the period was colored by ignorance and confabulation. Take away the fancy elaborations and you have a fair picture of a Komodo dragon.

The obviously fanciful stories about this animal are really not so difficult to understand. The Komodo dragon, like all monitor lizards, has an exceptionally long, bright-yellow, forked tongue which it flicks from its jaws like a snake. On a chilly morning, with the lizard's breath exhaled in steam, this yellow forked tongue does indeed resemble flames.

The idea of the single "jewel" contained in the skull of a dragon may have been inspired by the pineal eye still extant in many lizards. This is a vestigial organ, sometimes visible on the lizard's top skull, appearing as a translucent hard scale about the size of a peanut on the Komodo dragon.

In every way the Komodo dragon seems to have been the original inspiration for the Oriental dragon. Apparently such creatures stalked prey — including human beings — through the rolling hills and forests of China and nearby nations. The fear they provoked must have been intense and obviously left a lasting impression in the psyche of mankind.

* * *

BUT WHAT HAPPENED to the dragons? Why are they now isolated on Komodo?

I suspect the answer has to do with the sudden appearance of gunpowder, which took the lizards by surprise and decimated their numbers in short order. The monitors are neither as intelligent nor as well camouflaged as other large predators such as the tiger. They move relatively slowly, do not fear people and often boldly explore open land in broad daylight. They would have been easy targets and great trophies. Only Komodo Island's inaccessability saved these dragons from annihilation.

Once the creature was effectively eliminated from the mainland, it was relegated to legend, art and history. In time its very existence was forgotten.

But how did the dragons get to Europe? We know they did get there because they figure so prominently in the lore of that continent.

To answer that question, we'll have to backtrack a bit. I mentioned earlier that sizable monitors are found throughout Asia and Africa in modern times. One of the largest of these is the Nile monitor (*Varanus niloticus*), which today grows to a length of six feet. Because it is a monitor, it shares many physical and behavioral traits with the Komodo dragon. It rears on its hind legs when cornered, flies into fits of blind rage and attacks mercilessly.

Although a six-foot animal has not been shorted in the size department, some evidence suggests that the Nile monitor may have reached much greater size before gunpowder wiped out the largest and most dangerous specimens. The Nile monitor survives today only because relatively few human beings inhabit its natural range in North Africa. The Komodo dragon was destroyed completely because it was unfortunate enough to exist within an area that was fast becoming the most thickly populated area on earth. North Africa, by contrast, was and is one of the planet's least populated areas.

A few giant reptiles are known to have lived into our own time, only to fall victim to gunpowder. Verified photographs exist of (dead) American alligators over 20 feet long. Today the newspapers call a 13-foot specimen a "monster." In its March 1973 issue *Sports Afield* magazine published a photograph of an 11-foot, four-inch eastern diamondback rattlesnake killed in 1919. Today an eight-footer is considered a freakish giant. Around

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1900 the respected English explorer Percy Fawcett reported matter-of-factly that his expedition had killed a 62-foot anaconda. In our time the absolute maximum size such snakes are believed to reach is 38 feet — and one that long would make worldwide headlines as a bizarre fluke of nature. On the average these giant reptiles have "shrunk" 20 to 30 percent.

If this pattern of man's relentless butchery of giants holds true, then the big monitors reached much larger sizes too. Using the 20- to 30-percent figure as our guide for estimating average decrease in size, the Nile monitor reached an average length of eight to 11 feet and therefore may have been as much a true dragon as the Komodo variety.

If that is true, we can logically conclude that before the tragedy of gunpowder, huge and dangerous monitor dragons roamed not only the Oriental lands but also the North African deserts.

If giant monitor lizards existed in North Africa, the Romans who still ruled all of the Mediterranean world at that time (A.D. 1000-1400) could have brought them to Europe, just as they brought lions, bears and other animals which they used for blood sports. They well may have sold the lizards to the immensely wealthy royal families of Europe. We do know, for example, that the Romans captured and sold adult crocodiles whose buyers stocked them in the moats of their castles for protection. Presumably for the right price a large Nile monitor could also be captured alive and shipped to a European castle for protection of possessions, places and persons.

What deterrent could be more effective than a real dragon guarding particularly valuable treasures or acting as a fearsome watchdog for important buildings, caves, portals, armories, land preserves or food caches? Besides, who knows what madness might have gripped some medieval kings? It is all too easy to picture one of these royal tyrants buying a real dragon for some perverse purpose of his own. The sacrifice of prisoners and unwilling ladies to dragons may have been a common occurrence. And it just might be that more than one peevish princess found her door guarded by a 10-foot monitor.

Pure speculation? Perhaps. But we know beyond doubt that dragons exist in the real world. They made such an impression on our ancestors that to this day the very idea of the dragon excites our imaginations and calls up our deepest fears. Considering the size, appearance and ferocity of the giant monitors, this is hardly surprising.

There was a time in human history when chivalrous knights in gleaming armor did indeed do battle with dragons. It was a time when magic, wonder and knighthood were in flower and terrifying monsters prowled the woods.

Perhaps gunpowder neutralized the danger and then man's mind neutralized the fear. But dragons existed then and they exist today. They are still the proud, magnificent, fantastic monsters they always were.

Hypnosis Fails British Police . . .

What Happened to Genette Tate?

Ten minutes after talking with her friends, the girl vanished without a trace.

By Michael Goss

ABOUT 3:00 P. M. on Saturday August 19, 1978, in the small village of Aylesbeare, about 4½ miles east of Exeter, Devon, England, 13-year-old Genette Tate was cycling off to begin her second day as a newspaper delivery girl. She was taking the local evening papers to some farms on the outskirts of her home village. Her route took her down a quiet country lane where she met two girls she knew. After talking to them for a short time Genette rode on her way and the girls dawdled after her. It took them nearly 10 minutes to cover the 400 yards to where Genette's bicycle lay sprawled in the road and her newspapers strewn from the fallen bag.

These meager clues — the abandoned bicycle and the scattered newspapers — were the start of the biggest missing person investigation the West Country has ever seen. For Genette Tate had vanished. What had happened in the 10 minutes between the time she left the girls and their discovery of the cycle could only be conjectured. Her father and the police could not rule out the possibility that she had been lured or dragged into a car. Tourists used the lane as an alternative to the more heavily traveled roads to the coast; Genette's two friends remembered that a car had passed them not long after she had said good-bye and ridden on, and moreover the bicycle was found opposite a grassy space where a vehicle could have been conveniently parked, ready for a rapid getaway. But real evidence was lacking. Despite intensive local inquiries the police had no positive leads whatsoever.

On the same day and possibly moments before the girls came upon Genette's bicycle, two holidaymakers were walking along Within Road in the Aylesbeare vicinity. Mrs. Matilda Rogers, 36, from Hull in Yorkshire and her daughter Gail (about the same age as Genette) were among the potential witnesses who came forward in response to police appeals for information. They recalled that during their walk a car had passed very close to them — "so close," said Mrs. Rogers, "I thought the driver would stop to apologize." The women had a good